

There are, at this point in time, about 575 persons who belong to and constitute the congregation of Bethany Presbyterian Church. In addition there are several hundred children of those members, adult families who worship with the congregation regularly, people about to become members and occasional visitors. Altogether, it is an impressive number of people when one considers the fact that revolutions are started by a relatively tiny group of committed individuals. It is an impressive statistic - in light of the fact that people attached in some way to this congregation represent a larger percentage of the population of the Greater Lafayette area, than the percentage of Communist party members in the Peoples' Republic of China. It is even more impressive when one considers the fact that the members of this congregation, individually, promised to give their lives to the service of Christ, and said in effect, "my belonging to this congregation is the most important fact about me: it is my first commitment: it is my first loyalty."

And yet it is obvious that something is wrong: statistics - as is often the case - say one thing but reality says something altogether different. On the basis of raw data one could conclude quite logically that any group of people with the credentials I have recited is able to do anything it wants to do. It is - on the basis of its relative statistical strength - more than able to turn this community upside down: to set large and challenging goals and then accomplish them. On the basis of what's on paper, this group of people is quite able to elect a city administration, build housing for the poor, send ambassadors to Hanoi, operate a rehabilitation center for drug addicts, or if it chooses, hire a staff of professionals to provide the best educational program in the state. That's what the raw data says.

However, the jarring reality of our situation indicates that the major goal at this time of year is simply to make it to September without going too drastically into the red. The jarring reality of our situation is that the vast majority of us aren't even here this morning. And that even in the fall more than half of us won't be here on any kind of meaningful basis when this people gathers to affirm its identity and *celebrating* who it is.

The discrepancy between what's on paper and what is here, in fact, bothers ministers - particularly this one. Every June I experience a kind of ego crisis, and even though I

should have learned better by now, I entertain the notion - back in the recesses of my mind that this summer we won't make it: that the life of this congregation is very fragile indeed. I recall vividly that the Pulpit Committee that interviewed me six long years ago had at the top of its agenda the fact that there was a great gap between the paper congregation and the actual congregation: and I have great difficulty living with the fact that while we are stronger on paper - 150 people in worship during June is a very good day.

I share this with you, in full confidence that both my ego and the church budget will survive the summer, because I think it pushes us to do some hard thinking about the nature of this thing we call our Church. I share it because we are in this together, and if there is a discrepancy between what ought to be and what is, it rests on all of us.

As we look for answers I think there are three - for starters. First, there are two kinds of people who are very uptight about their church today. One group resists change: the church isn't what it used to be: Angela Davis is free, there are guitars in worship, and next Sunday they're taking the whole thing out on the lawn. And rather than risk emotional trauma it's simply easier to stay home. A second group of people sees the church as irrelevant because it's not changing fast enough: because on the major, gut issues of the day, - peace, race, arms limitation, gun control, busing, welfare reform, the Church arrives on the scene notoriously late. The third group isn't uptight particularly - for it, the Church just doesn't matter. They joined sometime in the past, but there is no real sense of belonging to a particular community of people: they don't get anything out of it - and they don't give anything to it.

With this in mind - the discrepancy between what ought to be and what is, and some suggested analytical answers, I invite you to think with me for a few moments about another situation, and to see if we cannot learn something about our own. The time was the middle of the First Century - the place, Thessalonica, a major port of call on the Aegean Sea. A large Roman naval garrison was located there and Thessalonica was a very cosmopolitan city bearing the influence of travelers and traders from all over the known world.

A man by the name of Paul came to Thessalonica, set up shop as a tent maker and began to share his new faith - the religion called Christianity. Gradually he gathered about him a tiny group of people who had come to believe the Gospel he represented. Because

of their beliefs they found themselves a small and distinct minority: and because of this thin normal, casual relationships were intensified. They learned very quickly in Thessalonica, that if they were to survive as a church, it would be because their relationship with each other had deepened to a new level of trusting and loving.

Paul left them and went on to Athens - and then Corinth. When a messenger brought him the news that there were internal problems in the tiny Thessalonian Church he wrote them a letter. That document is in the New Testament under the title "First Thessalonians." It is not a heavy letter theologically. It's trust, rather, is in the practical, day to day matters of being a church. I read, this morning the closing portion of that letter. Let me refresh your memories by pulling out a list of injunctions - and then let us assume that these statements are applicable to any people who see themselves as the church.

Live at peace among yourselves

Admonish the careless

Encourage the faint hearted

Support the weak

Be very patient with them all

Be always joyful

What comes through to me from that series of statements is a deep sense of community: a group of individuals who knew each other intimately, and whose existence as a people depended on the development of certain behavior patterns in the group. What comes through to me is a living organism that needs feeding and nurturing. And I think it is precisely at this point that those of us who want to take the church seriously must do some growing.

Somehow we expect people to act like a church without ever knowing what it means to be the church. Somehow we expect people to want to come to worship without ever sensing that we need them here in order for our worship to be complete. Somehow we expect people to love the world without ever sensing that the world starts right here.

One man put it this way: "The Christian Church must be the community of love before it can really do the things it ought to do." Think of that in terms of your own relationships with the other members of the congregation. How many do you know? Have you gone out of your way to meet those you don't know? Have you taken time to let someone know that you care? Have

you been open to the concerns and hurts of others - or do you chose - from among the congregation - a select group of friends? Are you supporting, encouraging and patient with other members of the church - or do you slam the door on your Deacon's face, pretend as if you're not at home on Stewardship Sunday, and divide the congregation generally into good guys and bad guys?

You see, my basic assumption is that there is a discrepancy between what ought to be and what is here precisely because most of us don't have the foggiest notion of what it means to be the church. And that is our mission: that is the first item on our agenda. Not to do something - but to be something: not to love the world - out there at a safe distance, but to discover what it means to love the world as it comes to us in the form and person of another human being who belongs to my congregation.

But we can't pray for each other in worship because that would look foolish: and we can't argue with each other because we don't trust each other: and we can't embrace each other because intimacy is suspect.

Well, I invite you today to share my impatience and boredom with the church as it is: and to take a few risks for the sake of discovering what it means to be the church. I invite you to greet someone you don't know this morning: and tomorrow when you meet one of our people who is on the fringe to tell them that we need them here with us and we miss them when they're not here and we care about what's happening in their lives.

Our first responsibility as members of this congregation is not to do anything; it is to be the church here, in this place. The doing will come: the doing will grow out of our being. But first, and always we need to be what we say we are - a church - a community of joyful people, at peace with each other and in love with each other.

It involves everyone of us: the Elders we elect to rule: the Deacons we elect to serve: and every individual who belongs here. Together we are called to be a model of what life is about: to say to the world: "Look here: this is what human life human relationships can be."

The world needs all the help it can get at this point. Let's provide it.

You and I need it too. In the name of Jesus Christ - who came to give us new life - let us be the church to each other. AMEN

Father, we are grateful for each other. Teach us to be loving: and help us to learn how to communicate and convey our love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN